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# The Game the Soviets Play

The Soviets play a grim little game that periodically drives the U.S. Strategic Air Command to distraction—and causes the deployment of its defensive forces to meet the challenge.

The knight in this strategic chess game is the Soviets' TU22M bomber, the one Americans call "the Backfire." The Soviets simply move a few of these nuclear-missile-carrying bombers to their Arctic bases at Olenegorsk and Severomorsk, putting them within striking distance of the United States. This requires an immediate countermove by the Strategic Air Command.

According to a secret National Security Council report, the Soviets pulled this vexing stunt twice in 1983 and once last year. With customary bureaucratic understatement, the NSC report says that such "temporary deployment . . . is cause for concern and continued careful monitoring."

Why all the concern? The Soviets maintain that the Backfire is a medium-range bomber, but U.S. experts think it has been souped up and is now a long-range strategic aircraft. As a report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff put it, "Detailed technical analysis indicates that the aircraft has intercontinental strike capabilities."

There are some sound reasons for this suspicion. Chief among them: the Pentagon has photographs of Backfire C, the latest model of the plane, which "clearly [show] refueling probes" attached. As the Joint Chiefs explain, "in-flight refueling, an option for which all Backfires are believed capable, would enhance intercontinental operations." The only reason for having refueling gear would be to increase the planes' range to intercontinental levels.

Without refueling capability, the Backfire's range is more than 2,500 nautical miles—enough to reach targets in the lower 48 states and continue on to land in Cuba or Nicaragua. With refueling, the Backfires could fly twice as far, returning to their home bases.

In addition to the refueling probes and the forward bases in the Arctic, the Backfires are believed to have acquired "new or improved engines"—another cause for worry.

And if all that's not enough to keep SAC awake nights, U.S. intelligence has discovered that long-range, air-launched nuclear cruise missiles have been tested from Backfire bombers.

The Soviets obviously attach as much importance to their Backfire bombers as U.S. monitors do: the Russians have been cheating on their 1979 promise to President Carter on the number of planes they would build each year.

Carter had gone to the Geneva SALT II talks that year smarting from an attack by the late Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.), who accused him of appeasing the Soviets.

The Backfire bomber gave him the opportunity to stand firm against the Soviets. The treaty as presented for signing contained no mention of the Backfire, but the Soviets had promised to provide a statement agreeing to limit production of the plane.

Seeing no such statement on the table, Carter coldly refused to sign the treaty until the Backfire agreement was forthcoming. There was a tense confrontation between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.

Finally, Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev broke the stalemate, saying with an air of sweet reasonableness: "Thirty. It's 30 a year. There! Another Soviet concession."

In its secret report on alleged Soviet violations of arms control agreements, the NSC recounted:

"President Carter stated that the United States enters into SALT II agreement on the basis of the commitments contained in the Soviet statement [on Backfire production] and that it considers the carrying out of these commitments to be essential to the obligations under the treaty."

But the Soviets didn't live up to Brezhnev's disarming assurance. No spectacular violations, perhaps, but as best U.S. intelligence can figure it, they have exceeded the 30 limit every year.

Initially there wasn't much concern over an extra Backfire or two a year, chiefly because the SALT II agreement had excluded mention of the United States' FB111A, a comparable bomber.

But that was when the Backfire was regarded as strictly a medium-range bomber that did not pose a serious threat to this country. The equation has changed with the alarming intelligence evidence that the Backfire has been transmuted into an intercontinental bomber.

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